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Don Newcombe Dies at 92; Dodger Pitcher Helped Break Racial Barrier

Don Newcombe with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1949, his debut season with the team, when he was named rookie of the year. Harry Harris/Associated Press

By Richard Goldstein

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Don Newcombe, the major leagues' first outstanding black pitcher and a star for the Brooklyn Dodgers in their glory years, the 1950s, died on Tuesday. He was 92.

The Dodgers announced his death but did not say where he died.

An imposing right-hander, at 6 feet 4 inches and 225 pounds, with an overpowering fastball, Newcombe claimed a string of achievements: rookie of the year in 1949; four-time all star; and the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1956, when he also won the first Cy Young Award as baseball's top pitcher. Moreover, he was the first black pitcher to start a World Series game.

But he also faced adversity that went beyond the racial taunts hurled at the first black major leaguers, including his Dodger teammates Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella. His career was cut short by alcoholism, and he was tormented by an undeserved reputation for failing to win big games, particularly in the World Series.

Newcombe had a career record of 149-90 with a 3.56 earned run average in 10 seasons with the Brooklyn and Los Angeles Dodgers, Cincinnati Reds and Cleveland Indians, missing two years of play because of military service.

In his rookie season, he won 17 games and lost 8 and led the league in shutouts with five. He had the league's best winning percentage in 1955, .800, when he posted a record of 20-5, and in 1956, .794, when he went 27-7.

He was also remarkably proficient at the plate for a pitcher. He set a single-season National League record for home runs by a pitcher with seven in 1955, and over his career hit 15 homers with a .271 batting average.

Carl Erskine, the outstanding right-hander who was Newcombe's teammate on the "Boys of Summer" teams, felt that Newcombe had not been given his due.

Newcombe, second from right, with his Dodger teammates Roy Campanella, far left, and Jackie Robinson, right, along with Larry Doby of the Cleveland Indians at the 1949 All-Star game at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. It was the first time African-Americans played in the event. Associated Press

"If Newcombe had not had two years away in the service, he could very well have been a Hall of Fame pitcher," Erskine told Peter Golenbock in his book "Bums" (1984).

Donald Newcombe was born on June 14, 1926, in Madison, N.J., and grew up in Elizabeth. His father was a chauffeur.

Newcombe pitched for the Newark Eagles of the Negro leagues in 1944 and 1945 and then was signed by Branch Rickey, the Dodgers' general manager, to a minor-league contract before the 1946 season. Rickey went on to break the modern major league color barrier the next year by signing Robinson to a Dodger contract.

Newcombe had two outstanding seasons with the Dodgers' farm team in Nashua, N.H., and another at Montreal before joining the Dodgers in May 1949.

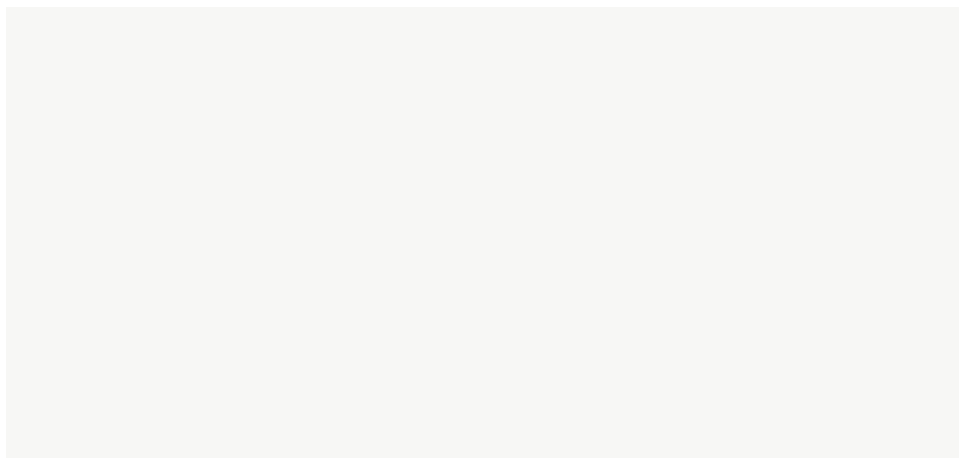
Dan Bankhead, who debuted for the Dodgers on Aug. 26, 1947, was the first black pitcher in the majors. But Newcombe was the first to be a star. He followed up his rookie-of-the-year season with a 19-11 record in 1950 and a 20-9 mark in 1951.

After two years in the Army, he had a mediocre season in 1954, then regained his form with 20 victories in 1955, when the Brooklyn Dodgers won their only World Series championship, and 27 in 1956.

But his heavy drinking took its toll, and after going 0-6 with the Dodgers at the outset of the 1958 season, their first year in Los Angeles, he was traded to Cincinnati. He lasted two more seasons in the major leagues, finishing his career with Cleveland.

Newcombe's reputation for failing in key games came largely from his 0-4 record in World Series play facing the Yankees, but he had proved himself in many a key moment. He pitched an outstanding game in his first Series defeat, in 1949, losing 1-0 on Tommy Henrich's ninth-inning home run. He was a mainstay for the Dodgers in the final weeks of the 1951 season, then pitched superbly on little rest in Game 3 of the playoffs against the Giants before Ralph Branca yielded Bobby Thomson's memorable pennant-winning home run.

Newcombe's worst moments came in Game 7 of the 1956 World Series, when Yogi Berra hit two home runs off him in the Yankees' 9-0 victory.



Newcombe, right, in 2008 during the 50th anniversary celebration of the Dodgers' move to

Long afterward, he remained bitter over his treatment in the press.

"Bob Feller never won a World Series game, either, but nobody said he choked," Newcombe told The Plain-Dealer of Cleveland in 1997. "Ted Williams and DiMaggio had bad World Series, but nobody said they choked. But they said it about me."

He acknowledged that he had never been on good terms with reporters. "I wasn't the nicest guy in the world," he said. "My attitude told them I didn't care what they wrote."

Newcombe drank heavily throughout his baseball career, and his problems worsened afterward. He said he stopped drinking in 1966, when his second wife, Billie, threatened to leave him and take their three children. He later spoke extensively on behalf of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

"We were a drinking family," he once recalled. "I remember drinking beer Pearl Harbor Day in a bar when I was 15. The drinking kept me from pitching another four or five years."

Newcombe returned to the Dodgers organization in 1970, when he became director of community relations. In an interview with The Los Angeles Times in 2010, he described pitching to Joe DiMaggio in 1949 in the first All-Star game to include black players.

"We never, ever dreamed we'd have a chance to play in the major leagues, so why even think about it?" he said. "We never talked about it, never thought about, never watched it. When I faced DiMaggio, I really didn't know who he was."

Survivors include his wife, Karen Newcombe; his sons Don Jr. and Brett; a stepson, Chris Peterson; a daughter, Kellye Roxanne Newcombe; and two grandchildren.

Newcombe was proud of his accomplishments as a pitcher. But he was immensely gratified as well to have played a role in the civil rights struggle by helping shatter baseball's racial barrier.

"We were paying our dues long before the civil rights marches," Newcombe recalled in a 1952 interview with The Sporting News. "Martin Luther King told me in my home one night, 'You'll never know what you and Jackie and Roy did to make it possible to do my job.'"

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